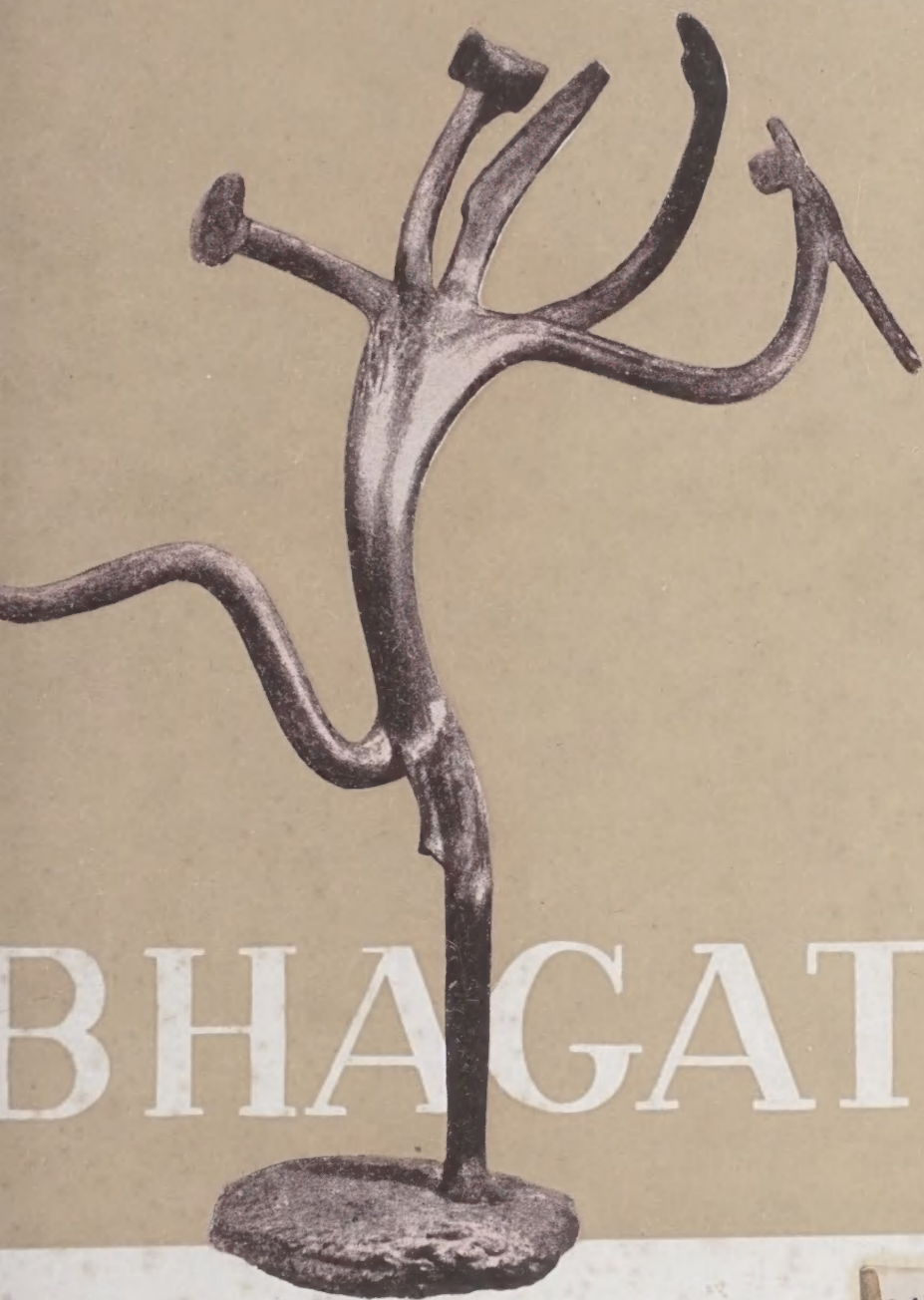


CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART SERIES



BHAGAT

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

3/2

LALIT KALĀ SERIES  
OF  
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

This series dealing with contemporary Indian Art has been undertaken by the Lalit Kala Akademi with the intention of popularising the work of India's leading painters and sculptors.

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# BHAGAT

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI  
INDIA



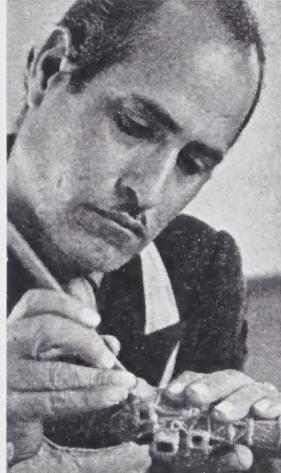
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# DHANRAJ BHAGAT



In the artistic development of Dhanraj Bhagat the development of modern Indian art is somehow exemplified—almost completely. Almost, because there is a point beyond which Dhanraj Bhagat is greater and more original than the ordinary run of modern Indian art history.

But his life spans that period of contemporary art history that had started with the academic education provided by government schools of art in great Indian cities, then came the moment when Indian artists started throwing off the shackles of school academism, and were readily swept off their feet by the winds of half-comprehended western influences; and finally came a period of search in which Indian artists were trying to find themselves and a style : a search in which few succeeded, but those who did gave birth to a sturdy young giant, modern Indian art. It was at this point that Dhanraj Bhagat stood alone, with an almost extravagant burst of individual experiments with styles, evolving from within, by an inner logic that marks him far above the average artist, a solitary peak among lower hills.

The type of clay or plaster of paris work that was carried on in these government schools of art had no character. Clay is an

amorphous material, with little individuality—unless you play with it as the archaic sculptor did who turned pellets into eyes and blobs into noses,—and Dhanraj Bhagat's first works have this lack of character. Only a historian with an artificial hindsight could discover genius in his first plaster modellings. I can see no exceptional quality in them. No promise. It is run-of-the-mill work. Any eight students out of ten in the Mayo School of Art, Lahore, could have turned out the same stuff.

Now it is characteristic of Dhanraj Bhagat that clay left him uninspired, but as soon as he got a material under his hands that had a strong individual quality, a material with a will of its own, as it were, he instantly sensed the inherent qualities of it, and carved figures that were no more run-of-the-mill, sculpture that had a strong original style. This material was wood.

Timber dictates, first of all, a shape; for wood is a long, cylindrical material—which clay is not. You can do violence to timber and make broad forms by sticking on jutting out arms and legs, or screw them to the central cylinder; these are falsehoods, for the nature of the material dictates forms that lie hidden in a long and round piece of a tree. Bhagat never committed violence to his material, and evolved forms out of timber that seem to have been secreted inside those pieces of wood for ages, and have been liberated by his chisel.

The surface too is conditioned by the nature of wood. You either show the chipping off process, the way the chisel removes the flakes from the surface to liberate those hidden forms; or you treat wood as a material that allows fine polishing and liquid, glossy surfaces.

About the year 1948—he was about 30 years old—Bhagat delighted in these liquid, stream-like forms. His sensitive and lyrical wooden figures flowed like

music, and melted forms one into the other, with soft, undulating lines, from the top of a chignon of a woman, through her gently sloping rounded shoulders, through large and beautiful breasts, long and sensuously shaped buttocks, down to the feet that disappeared into the block of wood. This was the poetry of longing, of unsullied, clean dreams not yet shattered by the horrors of Partition. It is a delight, a tactile joy, to run down your fingers on these smoothly polished, delicious surfaces of lovely women, elongated, yet unfashionably feminine, with broad hips, large buttocks and generous breasts.

But the times were harsh. In the Punjab man had become the wolf of man, wild fanatics rushed down the streets yelling wicked words of hatred against the other religion, knives were swished out from under cloaks and caftans, blood spattered the streets. Women and children lay massacred in heaps, the crackling laughter of monstrous fires leapt up from houses, rape and murder danced hand in hand to the sinister tune of shrill shrieks.

Where was now time for lyric and for gentle and tender softness? Bhagat's wood carvings acquire a rough edge, the chisel marks are left unsmoothed, a sturdy force enters his poetic work. **Reunion** (plate 3) talks of the sorrows of separation, and in 1952 he can make a head as sorrow stricken as the tragic face in plate 8. Here the other character of timber comes out clearly enough: the longitudinal form is still there, but the hidden image that lived inside the wood now emerges, showing the harsh chisel marks as it removed the unwanted chips. These are deeply felt, deeply moving images now, not



the placid passionless beauties that stood around in the earlier work, handsomely shaped, handsomely glossy.

This element has taken some time to develop in Dhanraj Bhagat. Love and lovely women still excited him to carve, and though he employed the rough hewn technique in his new home, Delhi, his inner peace went with him; for Dhanraj Bhagat is a quiet, self-contained man, fond of his retirement, fond of his solitude. And yet, if one examines plate 14 carefully, one sees a force, a development of sturdy limbs, an overall increase of power. Bhagat now does not look any more for smoothly flowing lines, forms that pass gently into others. What he now searches is simplification rather, the finding of Essential Forms, the elimination of accidental detail, unimportant little things.

Around 1954 he begins a series of experiments with new raw materials, mainly cement, sometimes in combination with iron filings, sometimes turning to such interesting materials as *papier mache*, aluminium or copper, always on the search, always trying to find out what the new material suggests by its own inherent character.

It is fascinating to compare an earlier timber figure of a woman. Let us look closely at the cement figure of a woman carrying a pitcher. The image is large, powerful, almost cruel in its force, of a gravid woman, with long, hanging breasts, a child on her hip, carrying, with bent head, a tired, poor creature. (plate 5). Done in 1954 this sculpture is not sensuous, not lyrical. It is filled with sorrow and compassion, it looks upon a woman as the carrier of eternal sorrows, the mother of mankind. Bold simplifications emphasize the main



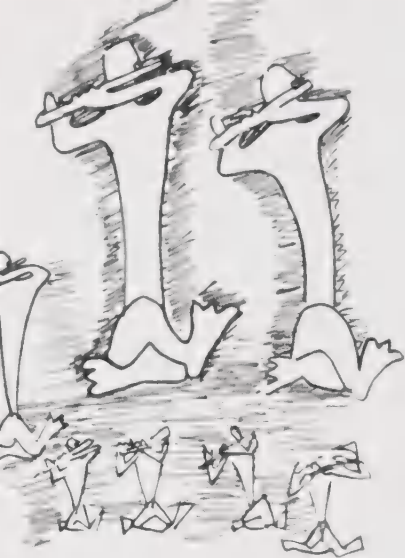
lines of this sculpture : the arms show no moulding of soft flesh, they are bearers of child and of pitcher; the exaggerated length of the trunk brings out more dramatically the long breasts, much suckled and lacking milk, and the large stomach heavy with a new embryonic child.

By 1955 the elongation becomes an obsession, a question of style. Dhanraj Bhagat had visited the United States, met M. Archipenko, and it is possible to discover some influence on his work by this great artist. Or is it, really ? To me it seems that Bhagat was developing in that direction in any case, by himself, and two years before his very brief visit to the U.S. he had discovered the importance of simplification and elongation. Indeed, elongation has been going on in his work as far back as Lahore, in 1946. (cf. plate 9).

There has always been much music in all good Indian sculpture, notably in the best bronzes of South India; not only in the Nataraja (Dancing Siva) statues, but in all those magnificent bronzes in which goddesses, queens and saints stand as if they had been caught in a moment of dance.

Dhanraj Bhagat finds this music in the newly flowing forms of his musicians and women, in which all the forms are used, almost like in a pencil sketch, to indicate direction, the dynamism of movement. In an early figure such as the **Flautist** (plate II) the elongation is not yet very pronounced, but the limbs and the trunk are subservient to the movement, that sinking forward of the whole body as the flautist bends to play his flute. There is a lovely rhythm in the way the right foot steps forward, the two knees bend to the beat, the arms curve to hold the instrument :





everything is concentrated on the flute, the whole image is flute-playing, the flute is the thing, the music of the flute.

But in the **Sitar-player** (plate 13) we have gone a good way farther. Body and limbs are not only subservient, they become THE music, their lines are essential forms that are only there to pluck the strings of the sitar, no diversion allowed in order to look at the forms or the

flesh of a human being. For this is not a human being, this is a sitar-player, its sole *raison d'être* is that it plays music, neither trunks, nor limbs have any other function or justification of existence in this image except that they are producing music, transcendental, abstract, ethereal. Dhanraj comes back again and again, as is his wont, to create many of these musical creatures, more music than creatures. They become more and more abstract performers of music, their symbolic bodies turn and twist to the playing of the instrument, they are devoid of coarse matter, they are music themselves.

It is at this point that Dhanraj leaves all his teachers, if there were any up to now, all his models, all his influences far behind. He discovers the flowing line in astonishing fantasias on women, in which the musical line alone dominates, all little incidental forms, all dress are forgotten, and we have lines and shapes that reach out into abstract ideas, the ideas of Plato, from some world of ideas, not from our sod-ridden world.

It was about 1953 that Dhanraj Bhagat reached out to greater conceptions. Beyond the sorrows of motherhood and

poverty, in his ripe maturity Bhagat started sorrowing with humanity. God, eternity, man in his mortal troubles, family and strife ideas that hardly touched him before, began to loom large before his vision. The world was not only of beautiful and desirable women, rich or poor; it had eternal problems, beyond the ability of man to deal with. Humanity was crying out for help, standing helpless against forces greater than itself.

A series of powerful sculptures followed, mostly very large and mostly in cement concrete, though he also worked in other materials, giving expression to these ideas. Astonishing forms arose out of his feeling that the human family is like a growing tree, and these soaring, vegetable looking forms were among the finest achievements of the period (plate 10).

Desperate groups of men and women and children cried out to heaven about injustice and unhappiness; rather nearer to earth, some of these groups had less elongation than other works of the period (plate 7).

It was now that the artist—by inclination a devout man, even if not a formalist Hindu, deep down in his heart a believer—first thought of expressing religious ideas in his sculpture. It seems to me that by some process of Jungian tribal memory he uncovered in his mind elements of tradition that his education had overlaid with blankets of western aesthetic approaches. Suddenly he felt the need to return to his ancestral heritage, his tribal memories, his tradition of two thousand and more years of cult images.

The result was the finest flowering of Hindu Bhagat, a moment of revelation in which Dhanraj Bhagat was the direct continuer of his ancestral art, and in which he gave expression to Hinduism with a perfection only the



greatest masters of India's past have been able to achieve.

Throwing himself at the feet of the Master (plate 15), we find him, kneeling, humility-stricken, small and powerless, praying. Large and superhuman, the master stands, an elongated form of mystic other-worldliness, not of this mortal stuff, rising mightily above his suppliant, a great figure of peace and reassurance, holding up the left hand in the gesture of *abhaya* ("no fear").

But it was in the Dancing Siva images that Dhanraj Bhagat rose to his greatest height. He returned to the subject again and again, and created tremendous, awe-inspiring figures, some of huge size, in which I see the culmination of Hindu divine sculpture. And if this statement appears extravagant praise, let me add that I consider Bhagat's best Dancing Siva images as at least equal if not superior to the much praised Natarajas of South India: images that have been rather overpraised in any case (first by Rodin), and among which a few only are of great sculptural quality.

In Bhagat's dynamic images of Siva the god is seen dancing the world into existence, and out of it. Limbs and trunk of the body become here dynamic movements only, unphysical, entirely transformed into movement. The modern material that he uses allowed Bhagat to create forms the old bronze-caster could not have achieved. But the old images of Siva the God of Dance are earth-bound, based on the human figure, with its muscles, its tendons, its flesh; whereas Bhagat's Sivas are not of this somatic world, they are the abstracts of gesture and movement, they are gestures and movements (Cover plate).

Even more terrifying are his few images of **Mahakala** ("The Great Time", plate 16) the devourer of life and the personification of destruction. In a frightful vision of death and using ageless symbols of ruthless and unfathomable powers, Bhagat

creates a head that has little parallel in the history of sculpture and in which his vision of later days begins to take shape.



The way to further abstraction has begun : the next two phases follow logically. The human figure becomes a tree-trunk-like shape, a cone, a long, phallus-like oblong, with a few important elements stuck on here and there, as in a child's drawing or the potter's little figurines. The three strange figures in plate 17 are a momentary search for some connexion between the old elongated figures and the next phase ; but in the groups illustrated in plate 19 and plate 20 sculpture is turned into a sort of new music, the human body is like notes struck on an instrument, following one the other, creating a strange melody in which women are like pipes of some divine organ.

From the tectonic and pillar-like forms of these figures there is only one more step to the architectural forms of Dhanraj Bhagat's latest work (plates 22, 23, 24). In these pillars the human figure is like a simile. Eyes are like windows, mouths like doors, heads are like columns or pillars, man is like a tectonic animal, in which round forms are eliminated. We are all like caryatids, carrying the burden of life like great and sturdy pillars, parts of the structure of humanity and of existence.

These masonry forms, these squarish and quadrangular forms are Dhanraj Bhagat's latest answer to the problems of sculptural creation : if we make things of stone and cement concrete, let them be like stone and cement concrete structures must be, in harmony with the nature of the material. And If

sculpture has to help the beauty of architecture, let the two spring from the same (or similar) formal inspiration.

It is thus that Dhanraj Bhagat, the humanitarian, the man of religion, the compassionate artist, retains the human element in his abstract art : whilst others have lost Man, Dhanraj Bhagat has found him. In the midst of masses of houses in the vast cities of the world, Man remains a sturdy structure himself, not easily defeated.

It is unlikely that this great creative artist, always able to produce new and new sculptural forms, would have reached now the end of his journey of exploration. The achievement is very great indeed : in Dhanraj Bhagat we have among us a descendant of those great masters who had created, age after age, in ancient India, in every period, fresh forms of sculpture, always ready to change and learn.

Charles Fabri.



















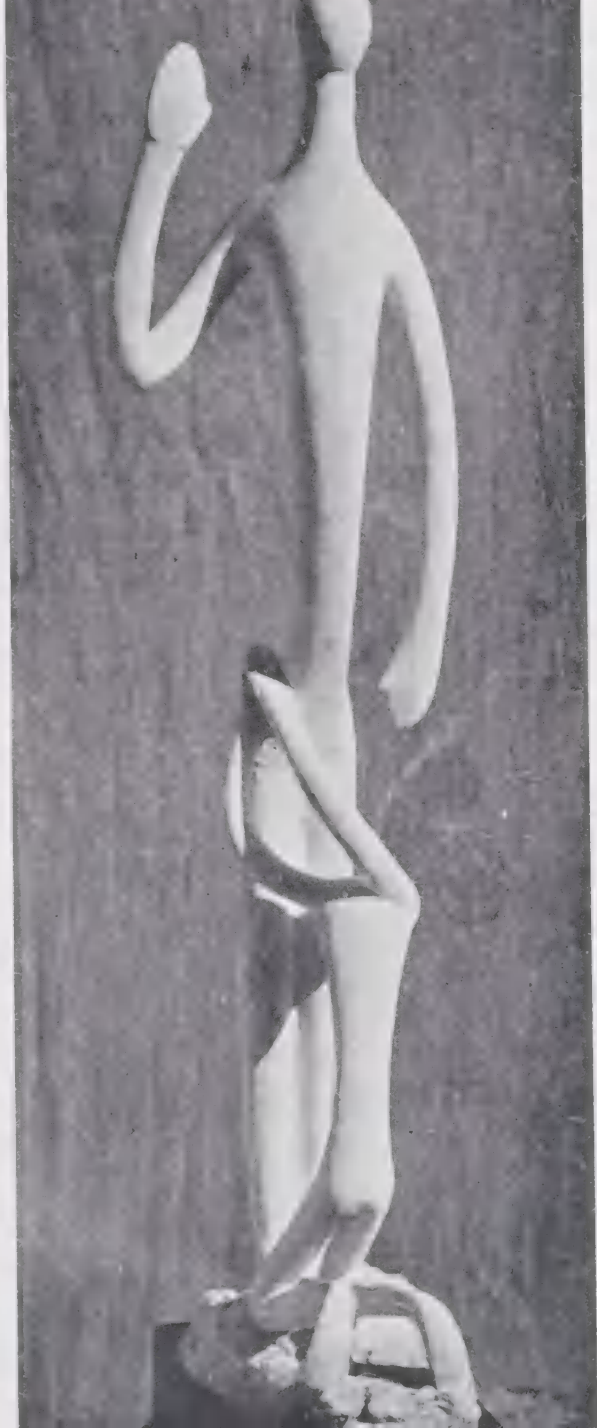














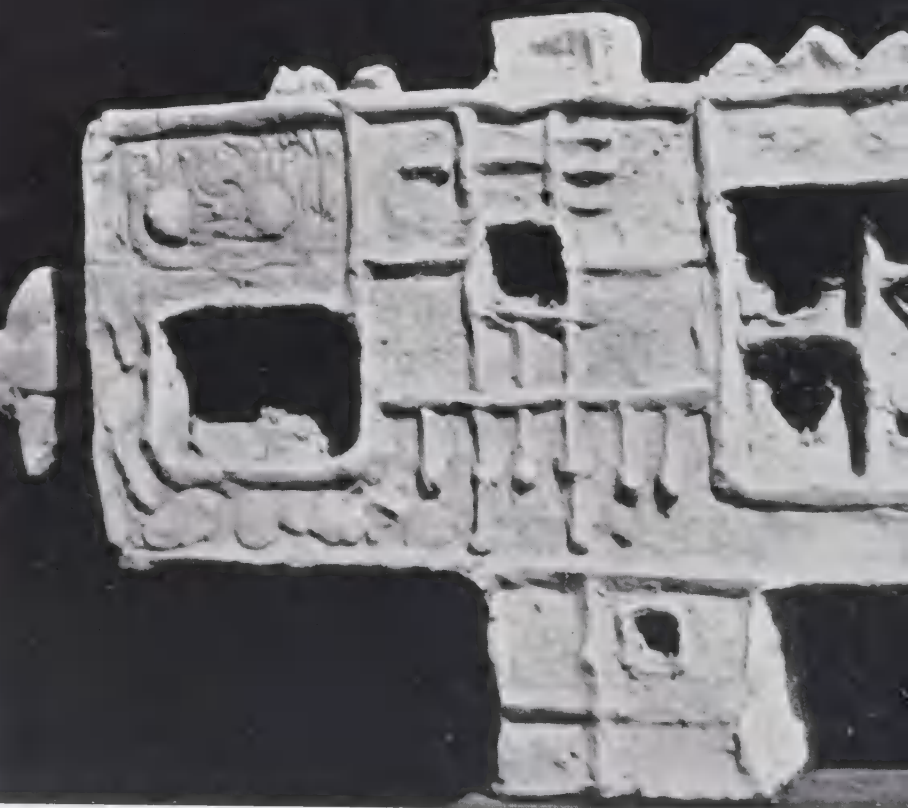


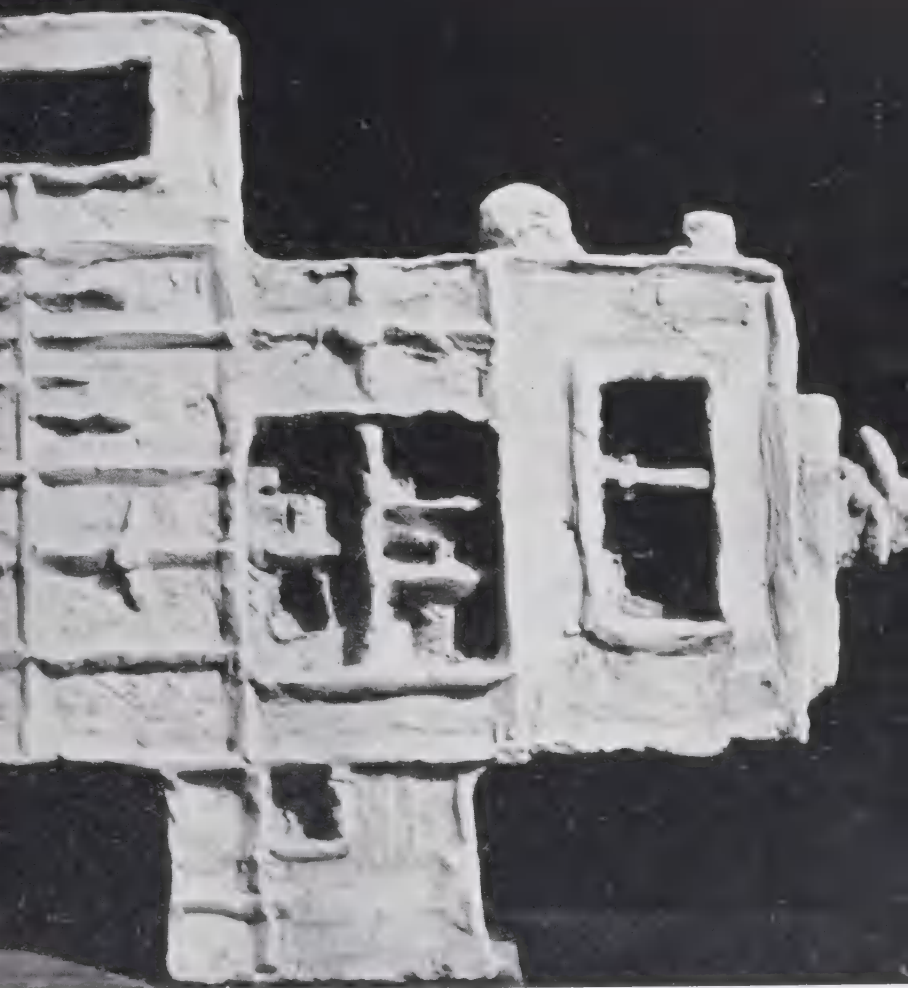




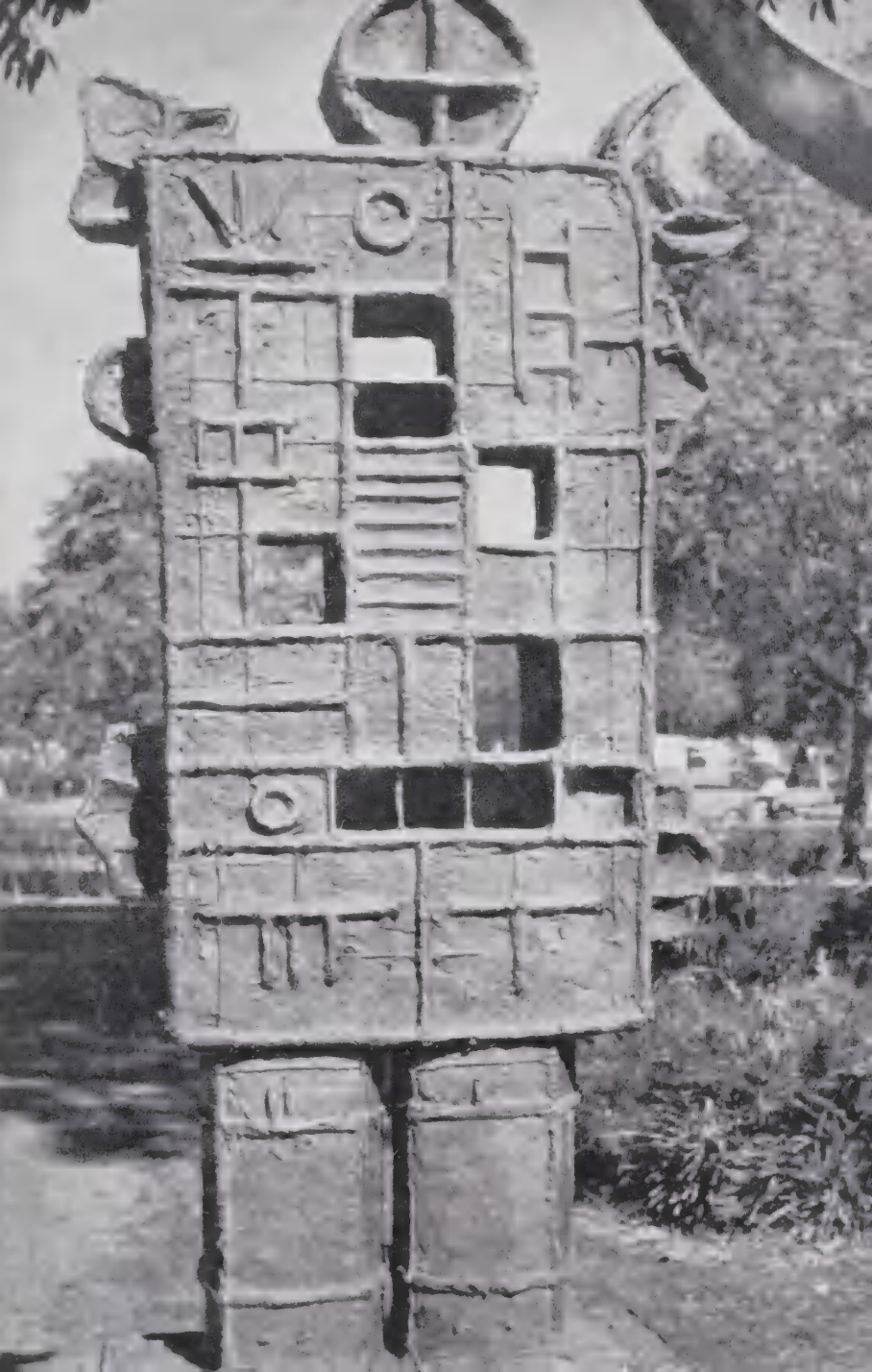






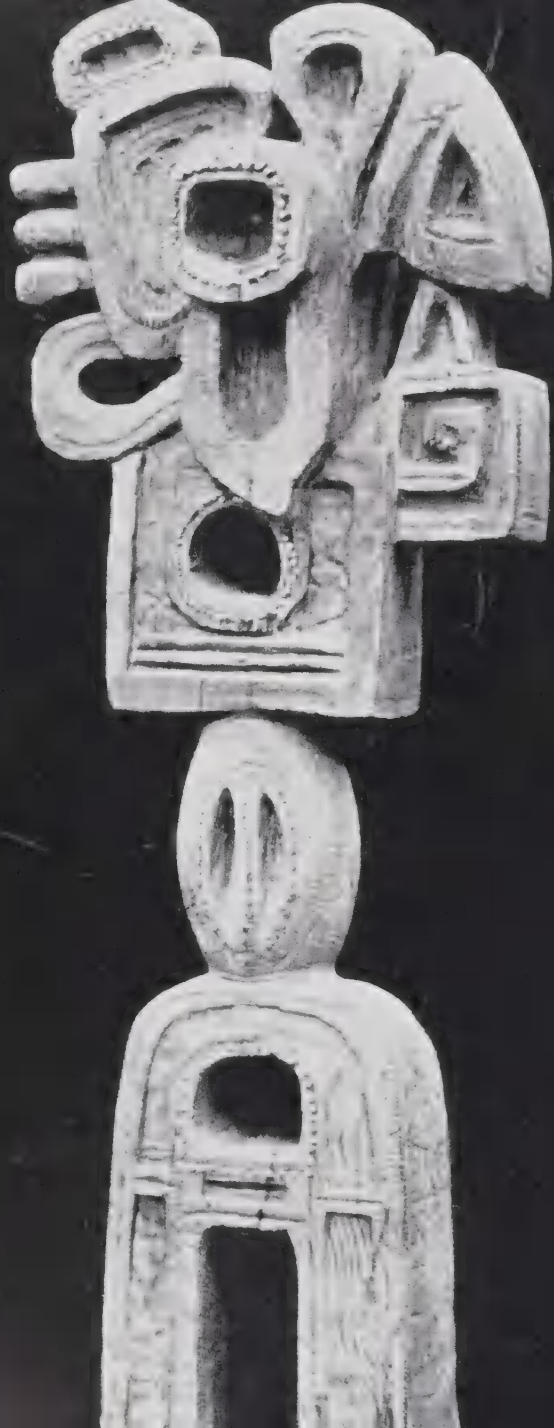
















# DHAN RAJ BHAGAT

# LALIT KALA AKADEMI

No.	Title	Medium	Size	Year	Collection
1.	Resting	Plaster	Ht. 64 cm.	1948	Artist
2.	Horse and Groom	Wood	26 cm.	1952	Dr. B.P. Pal
3.	Reunion	Wood	66 cm.	1947	Late Pt. Nehru
4.	Toilet	Wood	104 cm.	1951	Smt. Prabha Rastogi
5.	Burden	Reinf. concrete	115 cm.	1953	Artist
6.	Bull	Terracotta	15 cm.	1957	Sri P.A. Narielwala
7.	Awakening	Reinf. concrete	135 cm.	1953	Artist
8.	Despair	Wood	30 cm.	1953	
9.	Three Women	Wood	83 cm.	1953	Late Pt. Nehru
10.	Tree of Life	Papier Mache	80 cm.	1954	Artist
11.	Flautist	Plaster	122 cm.	1956	All India Handicrafts Board
12.	Drawing for Plate 13				Artist
13.	Sitar Player	Cement	130 cm.	1954	Artist
14.	The Kiss	Wood	85 cm.	1957	Artist
15.	Compassion	Plaster	91 cm.	1956	
16.	Mahakala	Plaster	98 cm.	1958	Artist
17.	Sitting Figures	Bronze	13.5 cm.	1962	Artist
18.	Flute Player	Welded Copper	155 cm.	1958	Artist
19.	Rajasthani Women	Plaster & Iron Filings	111 cm.	1960	Lalit Kala Akademi
20.	Homeward	Plaster	115 cm.	1960	Artist
21.	Laughing Faces	Ceramic	14 cm.	1962	Sri Kanwal Krishna
22.	Construction	Terracotta	26 cm.	1963	Sri M. Majumdar
23.	Man	Plaster & Iron Filings	52 cm.	1962	Panjab University
24.	Cosmic Man	Plaster	175 cm.	1962	Lalit Kala Akademi
25.	Sketches for Siva Dancing				
26.	Siva Dancing	Plaster	180 cm.	1956	Artist
27.	The King	Wood & Brass Nails	74 cm.	1964	Artist
28.	The Queen	Wood & Copper Nails	157 cm.	1964	Artist
29.	Portrait	Wood	71 cm.	1963	Artist

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Dhan Raj Bhagat**—b. 1917 ; Diploma in Sculpture from the Mayo School of Art, Lahore ; has been a professional sculptor since 1957 ; taught for some time in the Mayo School of Art ; worked as artist for a while in the Government of India. At present Head of the Sculpture Section, College of Art, New Delhi. Has participated in all major art exhibitions since 1937 and in particular : Indian Art Exhibition (London, 1947-48), Indian Art Exhibition to Eastern Europe (1956), Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta (Recipient of two gold medals), All India Sculptor's Exhibition organised by the National Gallery of Modern Art (1953), Panjab Fine Arts Society (First prize, 1937 and 1945), All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, New Delhi (First prize 1947 & 1949), Bombay Art Society (Prize, 1948 & 1949), VIth Biennale of Sao Paulo (1961). Has held several one-man shows in Delhi. Member of the Delhi Silpi Chakra and was for a time Secretary of the Group. Visited the U.S.A. under the auspices of International Education and travelled in Europe and Nepal on study tour. Studio : H-20, N.D.S.E. Part I, New Delhi.





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